

Virginia Department of Environmental Quality

Community Involvement Task Force

Final report

November 1, 2004

In March 2004, the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) called together a group of stakeholders in the environmental community to meet with DEQ staff members and discuss ways in which DEQ and the environmental community could work more closely and effectively together. This group became the Community Involvement Task Force, an outgrowth of DEQ's desire to increase its focus on community outreach and involvement. DEQ's goal was for the Task Force to propose a community involvement policy for the agency, to help improve DEQ's communication with the public and to enhance the opportunities people have to become involved in environmental decisions.

DEQ originally proposed that Director Robert G. Burnley would convene the Task Force, and that members of his senior staff would participate. At a meeting with the environmental interests before the first Task Force meeting, however, members of the environmental community expressed their desire to have the director participate as a full member of the Task Force. Mr. Burnley indicated that this was a matter of extraordinary significance to the agency, and to him, and that he respected the desire of the environmental community to have him participate. He agreed to make himself available to serve as a Task Force member.

In addition, DEQ hired a neutral facilitator, Barbara Hulburt of The McCammon Group, to assist the Task Force in reaching its goals of productive dialogue and specific action steps. Ms. Hulburt began working with the group immediately upon its formation to arrive at an understanding of the direction of the Task Force and to help the members reach their goals.

The facilitated process included meetings with the full group as well as calls, e-mails, and meetings with individual members and individual interest groups. These smaller meetings and individual contacts were for the purpose of ensuring that each group had a clear understanding of the needs of its own group, and that it could begin to develop an understanding of the needs of the other. These between-meeting contacts allowed the process to move forward most productively.

The meetings began with discussion of a number of issues that were raised initially by members of the environmental community. These concerns, which had been expressed to DEQ in a number of individual letters and other contacts, were organized by DEQ and presented to the Task Force. At its first two meetings, and at interest group meetings in between, the Task Force determined which of the issues were priorities and began setting expectations for how the concerns would be addressed and who would address them.

Throughout the course of the meetings, reports were made back to the large group of what progress was being made, what sub-groups had met and the substance of their discussions and recommendations, if any, and of what was left to do.

One outcome of the meetings was a series of community open house meetings, scheduled in each of DEQ's seven regions. These meetings were designed to involve the community in discussion of their environmental interests and issues. DEQ encouraged a focus on group discussion to help begin developing an action plan for community involvement in each region.

In addition to these meetings, DEQ and the environmental interests represented at the table have agreed to continue to meet on a regular basis to maintain discussion about community involvement in environmental actions in Virginia. DEQ and the environmental community recognize that the advocacy organizations and the state agency naturally will approach the issue of protecting the environment from different perspectives. At the same time, the conversations held during the Task Force meetings suggest that the interests of the two groups are very similar, and that there is much room for dialogue between them.

Other outcomes of the Task Force's work include numerous changes to the DEQ web site to enhance the availability of information for the public, and discussion of how to improve interaction of the public with the regulatory air, water and waste boards. A complete list of activities associated with the Task Force is included in Appendix C.

In compliance with the original instructions for the Task Force, a proposed Community Involvement Policy has been developed for submission to the DEQ director. The draft policy is included as Appendix D.

The following documents are attached as appendices to this report:

Appendix A. Members of the Community Involvement Task Force

Appendix B. Existing public participation opportunities in Department of Environmental Quality regulatory activities

Appendix C. Actions identified by the Community Involvement Task Force and the Department of Environmental Quality

Appendix D. Proposed Community Involvement Policy of the Department of Environmental Quality